

## 2009 in Review, Afghanistan Surge

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**When we look back on 2009, what will be the most significant government advances, actions or mistakes?**

History has a funny way of evolving. Without the pleasure of hindsight, some of the most far-reaching actions the government took in 2009 have been caught up in a whirlwind of criticism. But I'm confident that when everything shakes out, we'll come to see these measures as effective and absolutely necessary.

Of course, pretty much the whole year has been consumed by two issues: health care and the economy.

The final actions on health insurance reform may slip over into 2010 and it's not at all certain what the outcome will be, but we've already seen historic support for reform.

Many presidents have tried to fix our health care system, and many presidents have failed. But under the leadership of President Barack Obama and Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the House passed its version of the health care reform bill in November.

Was it perfect? Nope. Would it represent an enormous advance toward insuring all Americans and lowering health care costs? Absolutely.

The health care bill the House passed was far-reaching.

It would end the vile practice of insurance companies dropping coverage if Americans get sick; it would eliminate the ability to discriminate for pre-existing medical conditions; it would remove all co-pays for preventive care; it would put in place out-of-pocket caps while ending caps on insurance company payments; and it would create a public option that will introduce cooperation

into the insurance market while helping lower costs for all Americans.

In short, we desperately need this bill.

Would it be simpler to pass if the economy weren't in the doldrums? Certainly. But we can't always pick the time and place for our battles. And reforming health care is too important to put off.

That leaves us with the economy, the source of so much pain for so many Americans. Millions have lost their jobs, homes and livelihoods.

The most important step the federal government took was enacting the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, popularly known as the stimulus. I saw this bill as doing three things.

First, it made some important steps in putting Americans back to work. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office recently released a report detailing how the economy would be faring if the Recovery Act had not passed. The CBO reports that without the stimulus, GDP would be 1.2 to 3.2 percent lower, the unemployment rate would be 0.3 to 0.9 percentage points higher and between 600,000 and 1.6 million additional Americans would be jobless.

Second, the stimulus is making some lasting impacts on our nation's infrastructure while putting those Americans back to work. From roads, rail and waterways to public housing, schools and emergency services, the stimulus is investing taxpayer dollars wisely and in ways that will benefit us for years to come.

Finally, with so many Americans having financial difficulties, the Recovery Act had to serve as a safety net. It provided much-needed subsidies for COBRA health coverage, cut taxes for 95 percent of all Americans, provided help for Americans who wanted to go to college, invested in our small businesses and so much more.

I'm confident that supporting both health insurance reform and the Recovery Act were the right moves for the health of our country and our neighbors. And I look forward to 2010, which I'm sure will be just as busy as 2009.

### **What's your response to President Obama's plan to send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan?**

As I've made clear time and time again, I have been and continue to be opposed to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and I cannot support a blank check for sending American soldiers into Afghanistan. We won't see the people of Afghanistan step up their security efforts until we remove the crutch of the American military.

I believe it's vitally important that we begin to shift our ratio of aid from military and security to reconstruction and redevelopment. I strongly feel that many of the Afghani people will continue to resist overtures of peace until they have an infrastructure that they can rely on, economic opportunities that can support them and a sense that they control their own fate.

The president also suggested a timeline to begin ending our presence in Afghanistan, and that I do support. While I wish we were looking at a shorter window, we need to begin preparing for our departure.

Another element that we must remain vigilant about is how we turn over control and how we spend our aid money. Too often, the United States dedicates a huge percentage of money to American contractors rather than building up capacity within that targeted nation. If we really want to help, we should be employing locals, building up their ability to succeed.

For both Iraq and Afghanistan, our mission should be to work us out of a job. We're not there yet, but I'll keep working to move us in the right direction.